

Thank you for having me here today to offer my support for the new bill 1027. My name is Alexandra Mitchell, and from July 2015 to May of this year I was board chair of the Listening Ear in Lansing. It was one of my biggest achievements to be part of that organization, but now it is one of my biggest triggers.

At 21 years of age, I became a victim of sexual violence. When I began to tell others about what happened to me, I experienced what so many survivors do: I was blamed. I was blamed for my choices, and my actions. So like many other survivors, I did what I could to protect myself. I refused to tell anyone. I buried it deep inside myself, where it could not hurt me and would instead be the fire that drove me forward in my career choices. I wanted to be the person there for others, the way I wished someone had been there for me.

The aftermath of the assault was more than I ever expected. Suffering already from depression and anxiety, the effects of my assault were even more emotionally fraught. Self-harm, substance abuse, and PTSD permeated my life. Through a series of more emotionally fraught circumstances, I found myself at the Listening Ear. I hoped to learn to cope with my own issues, but to also learn how to be a better listener and advocate for others.

I became a member in April of 2014 and I immediately dedicated myself to positions of responsibility. In the two years I was there, I became a trainer, did quarterly statistics, became a staff board member, a sexual assault counselor and advocate, and as I mentioned previously board chair. I believed that people there were trustworthy. I believed that I was safe. And in both counts, I was unfortunately gravely wrong.

When my friend Andrew Dombrowski told me there were three registered sex offenders on staff, I felt paralyzed. I felt revictimized and disgusted. Not only were these men registered sex offenders, but some of the offenses had been against children. I nearly became sick when I considered that I had unknowingly shared a shift with an offender, who had hurt someone the way I had been hurt and worse. I could not feel clean, no matter how much I showered.

The situation became even worse when I began to approach other leadership about the situation. The Sexual Assault Advocacy Coordinator, Jamie Tomlinson, said, "Oh, I thought more people knew about that." The Staff Coordinator, Mitch Lindstrom, accused me of starting a witch hunt. These people that I believed I could trust, these people that I had shared my story with, knew about the presence of registered sex offenders and chose not to say a word to the board of directors.

In the short time between knowing of the existence of the registered sex offenders and my resignation from the board of directors, I couldn't sleep more than four hours a night. I had intermittent eyes twitches which made focusing at work nearly impossible. As I received threatening and rude text messages, I even endured a panic attack at work.

After my resignation from the board, my name was dragged through the mud. I continued to be blamed and treated like a malcontent for bringing this to the board's attention. I eventually informed some community members who felt the need to bring it to other organizations in the area. I will never be able to completely express my gratitude for the kindness and strength shared

with Mr. Dombrowski and myself from the community. To know that our actions were supported so heartily, shows me that while I left behind an organization and people I believed I could trust, in truth the people I can trust are out there and have my back. I believe the Firecracker Foundation Director Tashmika Torok said it best, "The redemption and healing of a past perpetrator can never trump the need that survivors of sexual trauma have for safe space."

As a community member, a volunteer, and a sexual assault survivor, I urge and ask for the support and passing of this bill in committee. Not only do at risk populations like survivors and children seeking help deserve to be protected, but any volunteer dealing with their own sexual assault should not be put at risk.

This situation has completely destroyed my capability for trust. To know so many people knew of the presence of registered sex offenders and also knew of the presence of sexual assault survivors volunteering at the Listening Ear is unconscionable. Their own mission statement reads, "Any form of sexual harassment and/or sexual assault on the part of individuals associated with the Listening Ear (staff and board members, other volunteers, and employees) will not be tolerated. Sexual harassment and sexual assault are contrary to our mission of ending all forms of sexual violence against all people." But to them, that meant nothing. The Listening Ear violated the trust of every survivor who sought help through their phone line and advocacy program, and the trust of every volunteer who is also a survivor who were unaware of the offenders. Their own actions speak louder than their words as it took media and community involvement to protect survivors.

Please do not allow other survivors and children to be put at risk again. Sexual violence affects so many lives, but they do not need to be revictimized. Support them by passing this bill in committee. Tell the community and the country that these actions will not stand, and that survivors and children deserve to be protected.